# spam stoppers

*If the average user's mail is 25 percent spam, there must be some very lucky people out there bringing the numbers down, because our in-boxes are overflowing with it.*

*By Brett Glass*

magine this: You rev up your e-mail program, eager to read new messages from friends, relatives, coworkers, and that interesting mailing list you just joined. Instead, your in-box is littered with solicitations for porn sites, come-ons for pyramid schemes, and even messages urging you to make improbable sums of money by flooding other people's mailboxes. By the time you separate wheat from chaff, you hardly have time to read, much less reply to, the mail you care about. Nothing will kill all your spam, but with the utilities and services that follow, you can take a big bite out of it.

**WHAT IS SPAM?**  Many spam fighters define spam as unsolicited commercial e-mail (UCE)—e-mail sent by a company that has no existing business relationship with you to get you to buy something. The person on the street leans toward a broader definition: "solicitations or mass mailings I didn't ask for and don't want." We agree.

**HOW THEY FIND YOU**  How do spammers get your e-mail address? The answer is: however they can. Post to an online discussion, such as mailing lists or Internet newsgroups, and spambots, programs that scan for e-mail addresses, will grab yours. Or try this: join AOL (or create a new screen name) and enter a chat room. Then watch your pristine e-mail box be defiled by porn.

Some online merchants may sell their mailing lists (including your address), especially when they go belly-up. For example, former readers of *The Industry Standard* recently began receiving solicitations from AOL Time Warner. Apparently, the media giant had bought the publication's subscriber list.

Finally, spammers collect addresses using viruses, worms, malicious code in Web pages, spyware hidden in software, and other techniques that amount to tampering with your machine.

**WHAT NOT TO DO**  Never reply directly to a spammer or attempt to use a link or address they claim will remove you from their list. At best, your request will bounce; at worst, it'll let the spammer know your address is valid.

If you want to complain, complain to the spammer's ISP. This requires that you either be technically savvy enough to analyze e-mail headers yourself, or have a good header-analysis tool such as Sam Spade for Windows (*http://samspade.org/ssw/*).

Expert or not, you may want to use an abuse reporting system such as abuse.net's contact database (*www.abuse.net/contact.html*) to route your complaint to the right address. Be warned, however, that many ISPs—particularly those outside the U.S.—will ignore your complaints because of language barriers, lack of interest, or lack of resources. You can also report spam to the Mail Abuse Prevention System, or MAPS (*www.mail-abuse.org*). MAPS cannot cut off a spammer's Internet service, but it can threaten to blacklist its addresses; then you can encourage your ISP to subscribe to MAPS's blacklists.

**DISPOSABLE E-MAIL ADDRESSES**  One way to cut down on spam is to create separate mail accounts for different mail types, such as personal mail, mail with e-commerce sites, mailing lists, and so on. The problem with this approach is that you have to check multiple accounts, and once an account starts getting spammed, you'll probably need to shut it down. An alternative is the disposable e-mail address (DEA). A DEA lets you send and receive mail using an alias that routes to a real e-mail account. Let's say you give a DEA to a company—call it SpamKing.com—and then anything SpamKing.com sends you will come to your real e-mail via the DEA. If you don't like the

## Client-Side Antispam Tools

*If your ISP or boss doesn't provide spam filtering but you're still fed up with spam, you may be able to use an antispam tool that works on the computer where you read your mail. These tools let you take mail matters into your own hands, blocking specific messages (or types of messages) that a company might be loath to block for everyone.*

**JUNK SPY**
Junk Spy (with pattern updates for one year, $59; thereafter, $24 per year) is the only client-side antispam product in this roundup that operates as a proxy, meaning it sits between your e-mail client and the server, acting in concert rather than as a competing client. The upshot is that you can have your regular e-mail software check mail automatically. Junk Spy tests incoming mail against a personal white list, a supplied database of patterns, and DNS blacklists.

Junk Spy has the ability to destroy junk-mail messages before they're downloaded or to flag them. The latter is recommended, because the former doesn't work with all e-mail clients. Flagging messages is also preferable because it lets your mail program filter the flagged messages into a "probable spam" mailbox, which you can check periodically for false positives. If you find a legitimate message in the folder, you can add it to the white list.

Though more accurate than most at detecting spam and relatively easy to set up (there are some TCP/IP tricks to master if you're running Norton Antivirus or are tunneling e-mail sessions through Secure Shell), Junk Spy does have some significant limitations. It supports POP3 only—not

mail you're getting from SpamKing.com—or whomever it sold your address to—just dispose of the DEA.

**Spamex** ($9.95 per year, free trial available) generates DEAs on demand via a pop-up window in your browser. You can organize, add, and delete DEAs via Spamex's Web-based interface, and the service automatically overwrites the *From* and *Reply to* addresses on your outgoing replies to the e-mail that arrived at a DEA, so recipients can't learn your real address. You can have multiple DEAs funneling e-mail to a single real in-box. Message subjects coming in to your real in-box from a DEA can be modified to reveal the disposable address where each e-mail was sent, so when the spam starts pouring in, you simply cancel the DEA—and know who sold your name. Multiple "real" addresses are allowed, and secure access via SSL is available. (ClicVU Inc., *www.spamex.com*. ●●●●○)

**SpamCon Foundation** ($15 per year) is a rebranded version of Spamex, with slightly different pricing and terms. Part of the fee goes to a nonprofit organization dedicated to fighting spam. (SpamCon Foundation, *www.spamcon.org/services/dea*. ●●●●○)

**Emailias** ($19.95 per year, free trial available) offers similar features in a simple point-and-click interface. And like Spamex, Emailias has not achieved seamless integration with e-mail client software. (Emailias LLC, *www.emailias.com*. ●●●●○)

**Sneakemail** (free) was the first DEA service; virtually all the others have copied at least some features from it. It's run on a shoestring by spam-fighting volunteers and is not as friendly to novices as Emailias or Spamex. The Web pages don't offer as much hand-holding as the best commercial DEA sites, and e-mail is the only way to get support if you run into trouble. Message sizes are limited to 80K (anything larger bounces), including attachments, which pretty much rules out use of the service for business or even serious personal use. (Sneakemail, *www.sneakemail.com* ●●●○○)

Like Sneakemail, **SpamMotel.com** is a free DEA service. Though the service is quite polished, its site is buggy and crashes repeatedly until you accept its cookies. Although it can be operated entirely from its Web interface, SpamMotel.com also offers something unique: a Windows program, which streamlines the use of the site for Windows users. SpamMotel.com plans to introduce a paid premium service but will continue to offer its basic, free service. (SpamMotel, *www.spammotel.com*. ●●●○○)

A full-featured e-mail service that goes far beyond just DEAs, **Mailshell** (with domain registration, $34.95 per year; for existing personal domains, $24.95 per year; free trial available) provides Web mail, POP3 and IMAP access, forwarding, virus screening, and spam filtering. The premium service includes registration of a unique domain for your incoming e-mail under Mailshell's name so that your personal information stays out of the Whois database. (Mailshell.com Inc., *http://mailshell.com*. ●●●●○)

**My Mail Oasis** (free) is a Web-based e-mail service with filtering rules that may be useful to stop spam (though it doesn't let you select other tools, such as the MAPS blacklists). The service offers disposable e-mail addresses, but Oasis's disposal mechanism is cruder than others: In two clicks, you can change your address from, say, *[name]@mymailoasis.com* to *[name].1001@mymailoasis.com*. Alas, this leaves behind not only spammers but also legitimate correspondents.

The site does offer one interesting feature, the Super Opt-In, whereby the site—not an individual user—subscribes to online newsletters and then passes them on to users who want them. If you want off the list, you must contact Oasis, not the original sender. (Online Companies Inc., *www.mymailoasis.com*. ●●○○○)

The DEA service **spamgourmet** (free) has a few interesting twists. Its disposable addresses normally expire after it receives a certain number of messages. (You can designate trusted senders, who you give e-mail addresses that won't expire.) The service also has a unique no-brainer mode, where you don't have to ask it to generate a DEA. Instead, you

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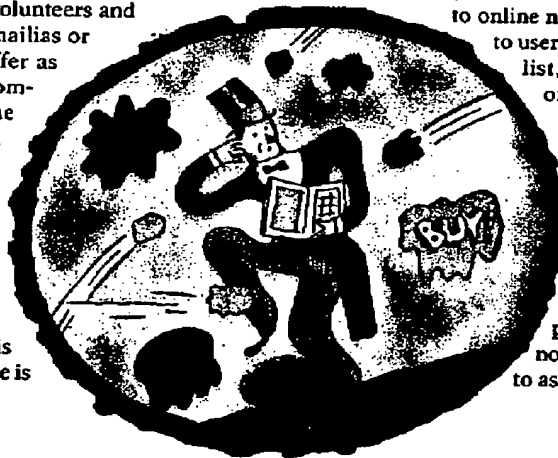
IMAP, AOL, or Web-based e-mail. And for some reason the current version is not compatible with Netscape 6 (though it works with Netscape 4.x). Junk Spy can't convert your address book to a white list; you must do this manually. And Junk Spy does not include spam-tracing tools or tools to aid you in filing abuse complaints. (Sundial Systems Corp., *www.junkspy.com*. ●●●○○)

**SPAM BUSTER**

Spam Buster (free; ad-free version, $19.95) works by checking your mailbox independent of your mail client and deleting messages that it recognizes as spam. It bases its decision exclusively on a message's header and size, as returned by the POP's TOP command. Spam Buster does not have to download the entire message from your mailbox, which makes it faster than

SpamKiller, and also prevents a server that removes mail once it's been retrieved from deleting mail that's been checked before you actually download it.

But since it looks only at the headers, the filter has less to work with and may give even more false positives. Given a mailbox containing 25 messages (none spam), Spam Buster misidentified 5 of them as spam. One had been sent by a user with a blacklisted@

earthlink.net address. Another was blocked, ironically, because the sender used a disposable e-mail address—the jumble of digits in the randomly generated address triggered the filter. Spam Buster can work with servers that use POP, but not with AOL, IMAP, or Web-based e-mail services.

Unfortunately, Spam Buster competes with your mail client for use of your mailbox and is thus subject to what program-